

Chomsky's Other Revolution

An Interview with Noam Chomsky

By Steven Robert Allen

FEBRUARY 21, 2000: Love him or hate him, few people have had as great an impact on 20th century thought as MIT linguist, activist, and political dissident Noam Chomsky. Regardless of how mainstream history comes to view Chomsky's radical critique of Western capitalism, that his work as a linguist has had a profound and lasting influence on all the cognitive sciences cannot be denied.

It's often been said that Chomsky is to linguistics what Einstein is to physics. His 1957 treatise, *Syntactic Structures*, initiated the so-called Chomskyan Revolution; in that book, Chomsky proposed a new linguistic theory which defined language as an innate human faculty hard-wired into our brains. Consequently, in Chomsky's view, there is a kind of "universal grammar" underlying all languages. Imagine that an alien came to Earth and observed the way we humans communicate with each other. According to Chomsky, this alien would perceive all languages on Earth as pretty much the same, with only superficial variations distinguishing, for example, English from Chinese.

Chomsky signed his name on the pages of intellectual history by proposing that the goal of linguistics be to discover and describe this universal grammar. Because of his central position in the field, however, Chomsky has the additional claim to fame of being the most attacked linguist of all time. Yet because of the overwhelming prominence of his work, successive generations of linguists have found themselves obliged to present their new ideas in decidedly Chomskyan terms, whether agreeing with his theories or not.

Linguistics aside, though, what lifted Chomsky to the level of cult figure is his political theorizing and relentless activism in defense of the victims of U.S. foreign policy. Politically, he embodies a rationalist, anti-authoritarian strand of leftist thought positioned in sharp contrast to Marxism and Leninism, which he calls libertarian socialism.

The *Alibi* recently had a rare opportunity to speak with Chomsky about the IRC, mass media, world trade, the Internet, and the future of our sad, crumbling Western civilization.

AN AMERICAN DISSIDENT

Alexander Cockburn once wrote, "Chomsky's greatest virtue is that his fundamental message is a simple one." Chomsky's central belief is that propaganda plays the same role in a democracy as violence plays in a dictatorship. In the United States, therefore, you need to be less afraid of the

National Guard and more afraid of the manipulation of information by governmental, corporate and academic sources. According to Chomsky, the elites who control and benefit from the American political system preserve that system by marginalizing alternative political views, selectively reporting on the consequences of United States foreign policy, and creating political apathy among the general populace by encouraging them to watch professional sports and TV sitcoms rather than actively participate in the political process.

Chomsky is fond of quoting John Jay, the president of the Constitutional Convention and the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, who expressed the conviction that, "The people who own the country ought to govern it." In Chomsky's view, that's exactly what has happened. Due to enormous corporate control of both national media and government, true participatory democracy doesn't have a chance in hell of flourishing in the United States of America.

THE TREND TOWARD OLIGOPOLY

Recent reports of mega-mergers in the information industry, such as the one between AOL and Time Warner, make Chomsky's political theories all the more poignant. But according to Chomsky, it's not just consolidations of media corporations that we have to worry about. "There's a general tendency for the whole system to move toward oligopoly, a small number of huge corporations which dominate one or another area and usually interact," Chomsky says. "The same is true in all the corporate system. The pharmaceutical corporations are also getting enormous public subsidies, and they're moving towards monopoly."

For Chomsky, though, there are particularly grave implications for democracy when narrow private powers control the distribution of information to the populace. "The media are using public property," he says. "It's the public who owns the airwaves, and [the corporate media] are basing themselves on publicly created technologies like the Internet. So we're living in a system of massive public subsidy for private tyrannies that are moving toward oligopoly. I think it's dangerous everywhere, but particularly in the media information systems."

The reason for this is that Chomsky believes that private corporations skew the information they present to the public to prop up a system which protects their vested interests. Since the institutional structure of this country leads to a kind of integrated system of brainwashing, individual reporters working within the mass media may not even be aware that they are presenting an unbalanced view of the world to their audience. The end result is that atrocities are often not reported in the national media -- or are under-reported or given a favorable or neutral slant -- if they are committed by dictators who are friendly to American business interests. This was true, for example, of media reporting on East Timor and several Latin American states ruled by pro-U.S. dictators.

WHAT TO DO

When asked what we should do about this disturbing state of affairs, Chomsky says, "I don't think these institutions even have a right to exist. So the question is where we go between undermining particular forms of tyranny ... and constraining or limiting them, which is a narrower objective. The more restricted moves are the ones on the immediate agenda, but the long-term moves should not be far from our minds."

According to Chomsky, one long-term goal should be to transform the media into public instruments, as opposed to tools employed by private power. "Back around 1930," he says, "there was a major conflict over whether radio -- which was just then coming along -- should remain in public hands as a device for interaction, information, education and so on, or whether it should be handed as a gift to commercial, private power."

Ultimately, radio *was* handed over to private power in the U.S., but this wasn't true in other countries. "In every other major industrialized country," Chomsky says, "radio remained primarily public, which means that it was as free as the country was. So, if it's a dictatorship, it's not at all free. If it's Canada or England, it's reasonably free. The United States was essentially alone in handing it over to private power."

When television came along about 20 years later, it automatically went over to private power without discussion, while in other countries it remained public. "And ever since then," says Chomsky, "private power has been chipping away at it. They don't stop. They want to buy it up. Just like any tyrannical system, it wants to expand, and if the public doesn't resist, that will happen."

That's why the mass media in the U.S. exhibits a much narrower range of ideological opinion than that of other free societies. Since huge private corporations have absolute control over the mass media, it shouldn't surprise anyone, says Chomsky, that the ideologies expressed therein generally tend to reflect the interests of the business world.

Yet Chomsky would be the first to admit that the system of indoctrination he describes is not monolithic; he simply believes that his description holds true in most cases.

ORDINARY PEOPLE

"Most people go to work and don't ask a lot of questions about what they're doing," Chomsky says. "They don't look very far beyond their desk or tomorrow's job prospects." He believes that there is a great effort made by this country's elites to keep people complacent and out of touch: The rabble has to be kept in line. "That's the ideal of the business world, the public relations industry, the advertising industry and so on," he says, "to separate people from one another, because they're dangerous when they're together. They get ideas."

They start to do things. Much better for them to be working very hard -- the U.S. has the longest work week in the industrial world -- and when they come home, exhausted, to turn on the tube and get brainwashed."

The sad result of this institutional structure, says Chomsky, is that people who might challenge the nastier outcomes of U.S. policies at home and abroad are turned into consuming automatons of "invented wants" who don't have the time or energy to contribute to the shaping of our society. "The apologists like to talk about how there's no alternative. You know, it's just kind of like cosmic forces pushing us, but it's not true. There are specific decisions made by particular institutions. It could be different decisions made by different institutions. It's all a matter of choice."

DEMOCRACY IN NAME ALONE

Even if the Bill Gateses of the world believe that what they're doing is for the good of humanity and that free market capitalism is the best system we've got, Chomsky says this doesn't matter. The results of their voracious desire for more and more of the world's natural and human resources are global violence, economic inequality and tight restrictions on the ability of ordinary people to shape the world in which they live. "Ask who's making the decisions and who's making the gains," says Chomsky. "And you'll notice a remarkable correlation. It doesn't mean that they wake up in the morning and say, 'Look, I'm going to rob everybody.' Even Hitler, I presume, had some system of justification. You can convince yourself you're a nice person. That's not hard to do. Everybody does that in their ordinary lives."

Chomsky doesn't have a lot of faith in the electoral process to change our society for the better, arguing that ties between government and big business are simply too tight. "There are big barriers to overcome," he says. "As things now stand, the electoral process is a matter of the population being permitted every once in a while to choose among virtually identical representatives of business power. That's better than having a dictator, but it's a very limited form of democracy. Most of the population realizes that and doesn't even participate. ... And of course elections are almost completely purchased. In the last congressional elections, 95 percent of the victors in the election outspent their opponents, and campaigns were overwhelmingly funded by corporations."

THE SHADY SIDE OF GLOBALIZATION

On Feb. 26, Chomsky will come to Albuquerque to give a speech called "Taking Control of Our Lives: Freedom, Sovereignty and Other Endangered Species," marking his first-ever presentation in New Mexico. The speech is part of the 20th Anniversary celebration for the IRC, a foreign policy think tank with offices in Albuquerque and Silver City. In cooperation with the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C., the IRC produces a series of publications

on a wide range of foreign policy issues and also maintains an extensive database on issues related to the U.S./Mexican border. Chomsky has been involved with the IRC since the early 1980s, when various issues related to Central America were just heating up.

"I'm going to speak on a broad range of topics," Chomsky says. "I'll be talking about the current version of globalization and economic organization that's been imposed by state corporate planning over the past 20 to 25 years, ... what it has to do with freedom and democracy and economic welfare. The kinds of issues that came up in Seattle, for example."

In his books, articles and speeches, Chomsky doesn't typically present a very cheery view of the world in which we live, but bright moments such as the WTO protests give him hope. "They brought together an unusually broad range of people, interests and backgrounds ... groups that rarely get together and find common ground. ... There were constructive proposals that came out of various segments. I don't agree with all of them. They certainly need to be developed. But it's a basis for a constructive form of globalization, a popular globalization, where people who are concerned with the same values and interests work to protect and expand them. And that's quite contrary to the agenda of the World Trade Organization."

One aspect of the WTO protests that Chomsky found particularly heartening was the role of the Internet in bringing various activists together. "That's why Seattle took place," he says. "If you had to have communication through the mass media there never would have been protests in Seattle. ... The same is true on other things. ... You can do good things with the Internet. The question is whether it will still be possible to do those good things after it falls totally into the hands of private power. They certainly don't want it to be used that way."

Though heralded as a new tool to enhance democracy just a few years ago, there are numerous signs that the Internet is being taken over by commercial interests. "In the early years of it, the term 'Information Highway' was the buzz word," Chomsky says. "That's been dropping and now the word 'e-commerce' is the buzz word. That makes a lot of sense. The Information Highway is exactly what corporate power doesn't want and e-commerce -- meaning you're glued to the tube and they try to sell you things -- that's exactly what they *do* want."

Yet Chomsky doesn't see a corporate takeover of the Web as inevitable. "Nothing is inevitable," he explains. "The idea of keeping the Internet as a real means of communication and interaction and democratic organizing and so on -- that can be done. After all, it's public property." In other words, the Internet doesn't have to go the way of radio and television. Chomsky believes that the fight to maintain public access and control over the Internet has become a central issue for those who value democracy in America.

CRITICIZING THE CRITIC

It's not at all ironic that Chomsky's political ideas have been marginalized in the U.S. He is still treated as intellectual royalty in Europe and Japan, where he's frequently featured as a talking head in the mass media. In this country, though, when his political views are considered at all (which is almost never), he's generally portrayed as a ranting conspiracy theorist. Critics have accused Chomsky of founding arguments on highly selective samplings of evidence, of overstating and exaggerating his case, of descending into a kind of moral relativism that favors left wing thugs over right wing thugs, and of failing to provide adequate, practical alternatives to replace existing institutions.

To be fair, Chomsky has said repeatedly that no one should automatically accept his analysis of Western capitalism. He merely suggests that people should discover for themselves, through rational inquiry, whether his description of the world is accurate. What his critics call a conspiracy theory, Chomsky calls "institutional analysis." In dozens of books, he has meticulously documented the historical development and specific abuses that have led to the bastardized corporate-controlled democracy Americans currently enjoy.

Agree or disagree with his political theories, Noam Chomsky always stimulates the kind of lively, outside-the-box debate that we just don't get enough of in this country. At the core, he is a child of the Enlightenment, a radical democrat and humanist who believes wholeheartedly that freedom and democracy not only improve our lives but may actually be essential for the survival of our species. His personal conviction is that any society based entirely on profit-mongering and acquisition is destined to self-destruct. It's a conviction that -- regardless of where you stand on the political spectrum -- might be worth giving some serious consideration.

For an excellent summary of Chomsky's ideas rent the documentary *Manufacturing Consent*. You can also browse through the Chomsky archive at www.zmag.org/chomsky/. Recommended introductions are *The Chomsky Reader* (Pantheon Books, paper, \$18) and *What Uncle Sam Really Wants* (Odonian Press, paper, \$8.50).
